

## Critical thinking and writing

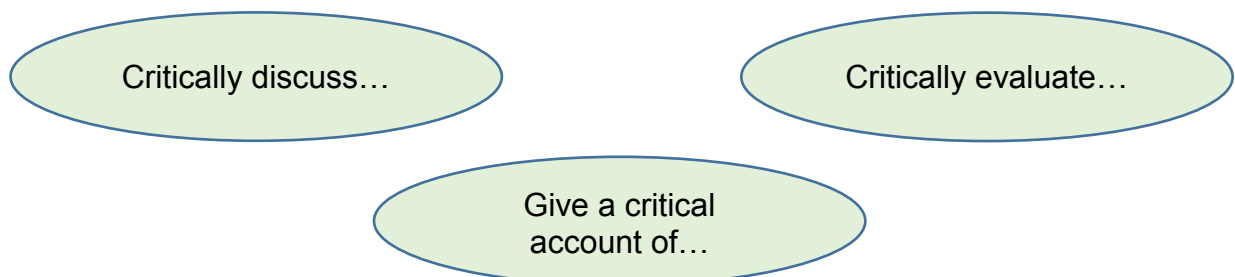
### Introduction

This guide helps you to:

- Understand what critical thinking is.
- Develop a strategy to critically evaluate texts, theories, arguments etc.
- Understand how to write critically in your assignments.

### What is critical thinking?

When looking at the instructions or marking scheme for an assignment, you will often find that you are required to be critical in some way. For example:



Being critical can mean slightly different things in different assignments, but these are some general principles that usually apply. Critical thinking is:

- Carefully considering an idea and evaluating the evidence supporting it to see if it is convincing.
- Explaining **why** the evidence is convincing or unconvincing. Building an argument.
- Being thoughtful or sceptical, asking questions, and not taking what you read/hear/see for granted.
- Identifying patterns, trends and relationships.
- Looking for bias.
- Noticing flaws in the logic of an argument.
- Making an objective evidence-based judgement, while paying attention to context.

## Ways to start being critical

In some assignments, you're asked to examine the internal robustness of a study, paper, theory, etc. Here are some questions you could use as prompts to help you start thinking critically about the study, paper or theory you're looking at:

- Is the methodology sound? (e.g. Was there a sufficient sample size? How was the sample selected?)
- What evidence is the writer basing their claim on? Is this evidence sound?
- Does the claim/conclusion follow logically from the evidence/findings?
- What assumptions is the writer making? Are these reasonable?
- What bias might the writer have? Are they credible / an authority?
- Are there any contradictions within the writer's theory?
- Are any of the words used not clearly defined?
- Has this work been peer reviewed?

For additional questions, look at CASP tools: <http://www.casp-uk.net/casp-tools-checklists>

You'll see that there are eight different CASP tools. To choose the right one, you need to know what type of study you are looking at (e.g. qualitative study, randomised control trial, etc.).

In addition, sometimes you might be required to think more broadly about how the study/paper/theory relates to other literature, or how it relates to the question or problem you're writing about. In that case, these questions might help:

- How useful is a particular theory (or study/policy/guideline/model) in addressing a particular problem (or scenario/issue). Is another theory better suited to the given problem?
- Is the theory (or study, policy, etc.) consistent with others in the field? e.g. How far does study A agree with study B? Why (not)?
- To what extent is the theory (or study, policy, etc.) applicable outside of its original context?
- What are the implications of the theory/theories for your question/problem?

## How to get more critical analysis into your essay

- Avoid unnecessary description – only include general background details and history when they add to your argument.
- Interpret your evidence – explain how and why your evidence supports your point. You should not rely on the evidence "speaking for itself".
- Be specific – avoid making sweeping generalisations. Be more measured and tie your argument to precise examples or case studies.
- Use counter-arguments to your advantage – if you find viewpoints that go against your own argument, don't ignore them. It strengthens an argument to include an opposing viewpoint and explain *why* it is not as convincing as your own line of reasoning.

(University of Reading, 2016)

## Hitting the right tone

Aim for:

- healthy scepticism ... but not cynicism
- confidence ... but not arrogance
- judgement which is critical ... but not dismissive
- being 'fair': assessing fairly the strengths and weaknesses of other people's ideas and writing ... without prejudice

(Wellington et al., 2005)

## Are you meant to be giving your opinion?

- You should be writing a reasoned and objective answer to the essay question, supported by evidence. The books, articles and research material that you read for your essay provide this evidence.
- The way in which you select and interpret the evidence, and explain why it answers the question, is where you demonstrate your own thinking. A string of quotes is *not* an essay.
- Where possible, paraphrase. Don't expect direct quotes to do all the work for you.

(University of Reading, 2016)

## Example of effective critical writing

This example was originally one paragraph, but it is broken up below for ease of reading:

There are a number of methodological difficulties in evaluating treatment efficacy in this area, and this has contributed to controversy within the research literature surrounding treatment outcomes for this group of offenders (Marshall, 1997).

Firstly, while there is no doubt that the primary measure of treatment success is a reduction in the rate of re-offending (Marshall et al., 1999), reconviction data does not, in isolation, provide a realistic representation of actual levels of re-offending by this group.

It is well established that there is a discrepancy between re-offending and reconviction rates: the latter underestimating the number of offences committed (Grubin, 1999).

Indeed, a significant proportion of offences committed by offenders are either unreported, or do not result in the offender being convicted (Abel et al., 1987).

(University of Leicester, 2017)

You can see how the author is considering the available evidence, but also the limitations of that evidence, and will take all of this into account in drawing conclusions.

## More advice from Academic Learning Support

For further study skills advice, and information on disability and specific learning differences such as dyslexia, enrol on the Learning Success Moodle page. Log into Moodle, go to [tiny.cc/learningsuccess](http://tiny.cc/learningsuccess), and scroll down to click the enrol button.

To make an appointment for one-to-one study skills support:

- go to the Learning Success reception in the Student Centre (2<sup>nd</sup> floor, Northampton Square), or
- call us on 0207 040 0246

## References

University of Leicester (2017) *Critical writing*. Available at:

<http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/writing/writing-resources/critical-writing> (Accessed: 20 April 2017).

University of Reading (2016) *Essay writing*. Available at: <http://libguides.reading.ac.uk/essays/developing> (Accessed: 21 April 2017).

Wellington J., Bathmaker A., Hunt C., McCulloch G. and Sikes P. (2005) *Succeeding with your doctorate*. London: Sage.